

## REMINISCENCES OF AN ELDERLY ENTOMOLOGIST

By R. P. DEMUTH\*

(Continued from Vo. 97, p.19)

I paid three more visits to Unst, the next two being in the period when my diary lapsed as I had belatedly discovered that young ladies were at least as interesting as moths and so I have nothing to go on but my memory. The first of these was the one with Arnold Hughes which I have already mentioned. Arnold was a keen Lancashire collector and then moved to Surrey. Unst finished him off and he never collected again. Next time I went, I went with a fisherman and this worked very well as we would drive over together from Baltasound to Burra Firth and I would collect all night and he with his ghillie would row up and down the Firth trawling for sea trout. I went with him once and it was quite exciting as the difficulty was not the catching of the fish but the getting of the fish into the boat without a seal getting it first. The ghillie, name of Abernethy, took a shotgun with him and any seal investigating with its head above water got a warning shot but we often landed bits of fish or no fish at all. All true Britons now love seals but I do not. My friend did however land one specimen sea trout intact and we waited at the Abernethy cottage for sufficient daylight to take its photograph but when the time was right the Abernethy cat had eaten off its tail! Abernethy had watched well-to-do southerners coming all the way to Unst to catch some rare moth and it occurred to him that if he could catch this moth and post it down to London he might be into a gold mine, anyhow more of a gold mine than rowing fishermen up and down the Firth all night. The only trouble was that of all the quantity of moths around he did not know which was the treasured one and he was always suggesting he should join me on my rounds and I, not liking the idea at all, would tell him I was in too much of a hurry to take him with me. In exasperation he shouted "Mr. Demuth is always in a hurry. He was born in a hurry!" Meanwhile Mrs. Abernethy would knit the most superb Fair Isle jerseys.

My diary begins again in 1946 when I left the Navy and in 1947 I paid my last Unst visit. I met Alfred Hedges at Findhorn for some preliminary collecting and then went on alone. (Hedges was a brewer and lived then in the Isle of Man. He was a fine entomologist and had a collection of the highest quality with every specimen in superb condition.) On August 5 we had an interesting night on the Culbin Sands where we sugared birch and pine. On the first round sugar was blank with a few moths on ragwort. It then began to rain hard with a strong wind from the N.W. On the next

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round moths were on sugar in numbers in the pouring rain and they continued to come until 1 am. *Depuncta* and *paleacea* were just coming out.

I arrived on Unst on August 8 and stayed at Ordaal, a long way round on the south side of the Baltasound inlet and not so conveniently placed as the Nord Hotel which had been long since closed. I at once went to see Robbie Mouat the postman, a delightful man and a natural naturalist and asked him about wild parsley for *templi* larvae. He said he had plenty in his garden and in a space which could be covered by a large bath towel I dug up 60 pupae in 20 minutes. They were so common that a spade full of earth might contain six pupae. I had hoped that the moth would be dark or somehow different but when they emerged they hardly differed from the normal. Next day I collected *consersa* larvae from the maritime campion growing on the shingle at Haroldswick. They were so common that I found it difficult to find any intact campion heads to take back to feed them on. Unlike the *templi* these produced a fine series of the dark Shetland form, many without any light markings. The insect that pleased me most was *cursoria* and for these I went to the sands at the head of Burra Firth. My diary: "*Cursoria* in every sort of variety was abundant on the sands though unfortunately almost over and only one in ten a setable insect. Some of the forms were as lovely as any I have ever seen. There was a strong wind and consequently they would not settle on the sheet but I find the way to get them is to walk slowly across the sands with the lamp shining on the ground when *cursoria*, mostly females busy egg-laying, will come running and fluttering along the sand towards the light. On trying to box them they roll up and half bury themselves in the sand and I think this is what they do in the daytime, hence the speed with which they remove their scales. I also think the eggs are probably laid in the sand."

*Glareosa* var. *edda* was, after *graminis*, the commonest insect and at light on a small heath near Ordaal I reckon to have attracted about 200 *graminis* and 100 *glareosa* all in prime condition and all *edda* except for one normal grey one. Later on this expedition at Spiggie at the extreme south of the mainland of Shetland my diary reads "a good few *glareosa*, all grey, saw no var. *edda* at all. Odd!" It was this oddness which attracted Bernard Kettlewell's attention and led to his expeditions to Shetland and a very detailed paper on *edda* and the conclusion that the extra light during the night period on Unst enabled the all night flying Common Gulls to pick off the grey *glareosa* so that only the dark *edda* survived through natural selection.

The west coast of Unst is high precipitous cliff and quite uninhabited and I spent a night there with my petrol lamp and sheet perched on a cliff ledge and took very striking and large forms of *xanthographa*, also *furva* commonly and *templi* just coming out on

August 17th, six weeks earlier than one might expect it in the south. My diary reads "Marvellous view and endless chattering, grunting and mewing from sea birds, seals, otters."

On this Unst expedition I had hired a car and the island was suffering an exceptional drought so that the peat hag was as hard as brick and I could drive the car to places which in a wet year it would be impossible to reach. I drove the car well off the road one night and parked it so that the headlights shone down on to the ground to see what would be attracted. Someone passing saw it and reported to the Island policeman "a car right off the road with its nose in a ditch. The driver must be dead or badly injured as he hasn't switched off his headlights." Out bicycled the policeman to find a busy lepidopterist at work and we both laughed at the report. Next night I was at Burra Firth (the *cursoria* expedition) and I was seen from the lighthouse shore station slowly walking back and forth with my bright light. "Someone with a bright light poaching salmon" and out came the policeman on his bicycle and after a seven mile ride not so pleased to see me. "Please sir tell me where you are going each night." I followed this good advice as next night I was on the cliffs of the west coast and my light was seen from the neighbouring island of Yell where no light had ever been seen before. Our policeman was again alerted: "Bright light half-way down the cliff near Petaster. Think there must be a wreck. Shall we call out the lifeboat?" Our policeman did not tell me his reply. For the lifeboat to have appeared below me crewed by eight lusty men of Shetland could have been an encounter I would have preferred to avoid. I might mention that on August 16th I collected under the aurora borealis which dimmed the value of my light. It was uncanny and impressive. Great beams of light like searchlights appearing over the northern horizon, getting brighter, flickering, fading, getting brighter again. I had no idea the aurora showed itself so early in the autumn.

While still on the subject of the police I will mention another encounter. I had my light on a remote part of the Culbin Sands miles from anywhere. It was a pitch dark night with no stars. Nevertheless my light was spotted. Probably a crashed aeroplane! About midnight two policemen arrived from Forres. They had walked a long way but were interested and amused by what they found. After about half an hour one said "It's getting cold so we will be off to bed." After another half hour there they were back again, not so cold but not so amused either. It is perfectly simple to walk across the Culbin Sands towards a light but equally impossible with no other landmarks to walk a straight course away from it. They had to wait with me until dawn.

Earlier in that summer (1947) I had been to Folkestone to see Morley, surely the most delightful of all entomologists of that generation. He had been in charge of education in Palestine and had retired to Folkestone and there at Christchurch in Sandgate Road

was the then famous "Morley's Wall". It was famous for the wide variety of *perla* which sat on it from almost black to yellow/brown. On July 19 I saw one blackish (but not extreme) form and three yellow/browns out of about 25 all told. Interesting if they still exist?

I had been in contact with Morley earlier in 1947 when I had found *ononaria* in numbers at Sandwich in Kent. I had previously taken a single *ononaria* before the war on Dungeness which my diary refers to as 'my rarest moth'. My diary: 'June 20 (1947). In the evening on the stretch of sand dune just south of the Princes Links Club House, Sandwich. Dense drizzle all the evening but warm and dark. Sugared marram but all the sugar was washed off. A few *ripae* of the local brownish grey form, also *albicolon* and other common insects. First insect at light was *ononaria*, followed by about 20 others in quick succession and many more sitting on grass stems, in fact I began to doubt my identification, but I was quite right and was the discoverer of one of our rarest moths in great abundance. Other insects at light were *pygmaeola* in some numbers, *octogesima* and *villica*. I counted over 20 *porcellus* sitting on strands of barbed wire near patches of bedstraw. No doubt the soaking wet herbage had encouraged them to rest on something drier."

I have no doubt that the war had caused the upsurge in *ononaria*. In normal times this stretch of sand dunes is trodden flat by thousands of holidaymakers' feet. During the war it was completely out of bounds and a huge anti-tank defence scaffolding had been erected along the whole length of this coast and interwoven with barbed wire and the weak growth of restharrow and other plants had luxuriated over the backs of the sand dunes in an unbroken mass.

Next day, I took the *ononaria* to show Morley and he jumped into my car and we returned to Sandwich.

June 21. In the afternoon Morley and I walked about the same spot (Sandwich). In less than an hour we caught and examined over 40 *ononaria* looking for colour variations. He kept a lovely pink one but we released most of them. *Ononaria* flies gently in the sun but is not so easy to disturb when the sun is in. It sits on grass blades in an inverted position. The correct type of locality requires restharrow growing in combination with longish grass and some shelter. On August 30th I was at Sandwich again and the second brood was out but in poor condition. My diary reads that they are much paler than the first brood but this may be due to their poor condition. Kettlewell and I dealt with the larvae next year. My diary May 30 (1948) reads "We went to Sandwich to look for *ononaria* larvae in the place where I had found the moth last year. We got about 60 in two hours. It was sunny and they were feeding on the tops of the sprays of restharrow, but they are the same colour as the leaves and not easy to see. They bite off the top

of the shoot and this drops off and gives the show away. They varied from half to full grown but we met a young fellow from Canterbury there and he told us that 50% had pupated and Bernard found one pupa.

Easter was early in 1948 and I spent it at Rannoch. Rannoch was the original locality for *nubeculosa* but it appeared to have died out until a specimen was found in the power station north-west of the lake the previous spring. The Rannoch specimens were said to be lighter coloured than the Aviemore ones and I thought it worth investigating. I spent the first day fruitlessly examining birch trunks on the south of the lake and the morning of the second day on the north side. Then as I drove along a half mile east of Killichonan I spotted a pair on a telegraph pole and that was the place and they were on the tree trunks all around. My diary concludes that this insect requires old trees with roots in dry ground and in a position fully exposed to the sun.

On May 15 I was back at Rannoch (how one did get about in those days and still earn one's living in London). I climbed Meall Dearg for *alpicola* and got 25, the majority of larvae on the point of pupating. There was a drought and the lichen under which they pupated was very dry and sharp and this cut and killed another ten. *Melanopa* was in some numbers flying about in the sun and crawling over plants and stones. Years ago, before the war, Cockayne had told me how to get *melanopa*. You collected branches of bearberry in full flower from the high ground south of Loch Rannoch and you took them to the Rannoch to Dalchalloch road where it crosses the high saddle and you put them in little neat piles in the middle of the road when the sun was shining and *melanopa* would arrive and go to the flowers in the centre of the bunch and all you needed to do was to put your net over each bunch in turn. I did this in 1936 and it worked beautifully. The road is now B847 with in summer a car every few minutes. In 1936 I cannot remember a single car disturbed my neat little piles!

(To be continued)

SCOPULA RUBIGINATA HUFN.: TAWNY WAVE IN CORNWALL. — Two specimens of this insect were attracted to my m/v light at the Lizard, August 22nd., 1984. I have been unable to trace any previous record of this moth for Cornwall, although R. South (The Moths of the British Isles, 1908) mentions a casual specimen taken in the Newton Abbot district of S. Devon, 1902. The two Lizard specimens, undoubtedly immigrants, arrived on a night noted for vast numbers of *Plusia gamma* L. which fortunately settled on the illuminated rock face rather than enter the trap. — B. K. WEST, 36 Briar Road, Bexley, Kent.

CORRIGENDUM. — Vol. 96 (Nov.-Dec. 1984) p. 243, line 12: for 'P. J. Hammond' read 'P. M. Hammond'.